

## Introduction

*MFA IN A BOX* is not a How to Write Book. It's a *Why* to Write Book.

If you want a How to Write Book, two good ones are William Zinssner's *On Writing Well* and Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town*. In my decades of teaching writing, I've consistently assigned those two books to my students. Another book I always assign is Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*, because new writers make apostrophe mistakes. Editors view apostrophe mistakes the way they might view a worm dropping out of the nose of a corpse, and as far as they're concerned, the corpse belongs to the writer whose flawed manuscript they're reading.

This book is full of references to other writers and their works, and you may recognize the worm and the nose above as an allusion to *Gilgamesh*, one of the oldest stories in the world. It's a story about death and grief, and I consider death and grief so important to writers that I've devoted a chapter of this book to a meditation on *Gilgamesh* as a twenty-first century story.

If you read every work that I allude to in these pages, you'll have the foundation for a decent, if quirky, education in the humanities. You'll also be familiar with the struggles of brilliant minds to make meaning in a universe that can seem devoid of

meaning. If you're struggling to make meaning out of your own experience, this book will help.

ALL OF THE CHAPTERS in this book had their origins in problems that either stopped my writing cold or that would have stopped it if I'd thought about them.

Here's an example: at one point in my teaching career I told my writing students, "You can't avoid nihilism, you have to go through it."

My glib words sounded good to me and may have sounded good to my students, but they wouldn't have sounded good to people who had studied Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, philosophers who had actually grappled with the problem. The old Schopenhauer joke goes that Socrates said the unexamined life is not worth living, and two thousand years later Schopenhauer discovered that the examined life isn't worth living either.

Actually, the phrase *Schopenhauer joke* is a joke.

So one of my chapters discusses what I meant by "going through nihilism," and the soul-destroying things that can happen to you if you try. As far as I know, none of my students actually did try to go through nihilism, which is a good thing.

These days, my less-than-glib caution to writers is that almost no one who dives into a belief in nothing makes it through to believing in something. Furthermore, if you write the truth about the world we live in, you're going to be facing more voids than just the blank screen in front of you. Now I tell my students, "Try not to write out of a totally naïve place. But don't write out of a place where you're so street smart that you don't believe in anything, because you'll quit writing or you'll kill yourself."

Too dark? Nothing in this book will be as dark as that place in the middle of a story where you're convinced that you're writing a bridge to nowhere, and that the idea of writing as an identity and occupation was a bad one in the first place.

Every writer faces that dark place, and a lot of them succumb to it. A good many people who invest years of their lives and tens of thousands of dollars in an MFA degree never write again, simply because they cannot follow a story into its own depths, or they fear that if they do, they'll never get back to daylight.

A big part of this *Why to Write Book* involves grappling with and defeating the terrors and discouragements that come when you have writing skills but can't project yourself or your work into the future. This book will give you solace in those dark nights of the soul, and it will give evidence that the sun eventually breaks the darkest horizon.

**THIS BOOK** tries to show and not tell. Whatever that means.

Somewhere far away and long ago, probably in the ancient city of Uruk, when Gilgamesh was its king, the first fiction workshop was held. When the workshop's first story was written on slabs of clay and passed around the group, fourteen of the fifteen people who read it inscribed the Uruk equivalent of *Show Don't Tell* in its margins.

If everyone agreed on the meaning of *Show Don't Tell*, there would be no reason for MFA programs. The great novels that people hold in their hearts would translate directly to the page, and then fly back off the page into the hearts of happy readers everywhere. That doesn't happen. One problem is that *Show Don't Tell* doesn't refer to what happens on the page. It refers to

what happens in your reader's head when he or she looks at the page.

I don't claim that you'll know the ultimate meaning of *Show Don't Tell* by my last chapter, but you'll know more about what it means than you know now.

Parts of this book are a writer's memoir, parts of it are tales from my misspent youth, and parts of it are knowledge that I received from generous teachers. You will be relieved to know that I don't pretend that your path to writing will be the same as my path to writing.

Almost everything in this book will require that you translate it into your own terms. After all, I'm an old white guy writing in the middle of Idaho. Chances are that you're not one of those. So read with an eye toward changing my metaphors and images into equivalent metaphors and images from your own life. Above all, let my stories spark your own.

I HOPE that when you finish this book you'll be able to balance the deep despair of writing with the deeper joy of writing. I hope you'll find the courage to put truth into words. I hope you'll find reasons for being kind and intelligent in the presence of your readers and characters. I hope you'll understand that writing is a life-and-death endeavor, but nothing about a life-and-death endeavor keeps it from being laugh-out-loud funny.

I hope you'll finish this book with more reasons to write than not to write.

Finally, this book is in no way intended to replace a real MFA. If it were, I'd be charging a lot more for it. But if you have decided to become a serious and literary writer, it will give you

glimpses of the terrain ahead, and an idea of the talent and will and good luck that you'll need to negotiate that terrain, and even some alternate routes around the rough spots.

If you are an MFA student, this book will help you get more for your tuition money.

Regardless of who you are, it will give you reason to sit in that chair and to face the screen that has nothing on it. Yet.

John Rember  
Sawtooth Valley, Idaho  
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## Rules for Writers

### *Jack Henry Abbott's Ten Tips for Writing in a World That Won't Give You the Key to the Restroom*

1. Know that what you put on the page isn't reality. What you put on the page is an artifact you hope your reader will accept as real for awhile. But the story ends. The book is put down, and only your reader is able to say whether it was worth the time to read it.
2. Embrace the conventions of photography. Use frames, focus, lenses, shutter speeds, slow-motion, camera angles, strobe-lights, studio backdrops, negative space, and Photoshop. Take the time to compose images. Remember that some images are more interesting than others. A series of still shots can be put together in sequence to form narrative.
3. If a part of your story doesn't puncture or betray another part, you haven't finished the story.
4. What you think the world is or want the world to be can overwhelm your perceptions of the Now. Don't let it. Your perceptions are all you have that are truly your own. One crystal-clear vision is worth more to your reader than a dozen brilliant conclusions. Let your reader draw the brilliant conclusions from your vision. You'll both be happier.
5. It's okay to have a savage sense of irony. A sense of irony is an awareness of the difference between the way things are and the way things are supposed to be. The bigger the difference, the more savage the irony.

6. Don't let your reader have a more developed sense of irony than you do. Other ways to put this: don't take anything for granted that your reader doesn't take for granted. Don't be sappy stern about something your reader finds funny.
7. Don't be afraid to be a criminal at the keyboard. You wouldn't want to write if you didn't have criminal tendencies. Writing is rebellion, a defiance of the order of the universe. If Zeus's punishment for your defiance seems not to fit the crime, just remember that your liver will be as good as new tomorrow.
8. Much rewriting and editing is simply improving the signal-to-noise ratio of a story until a reader can stand to listen. Static comes in many forms, among them vagueness, wordiness, avoiding conflict, dialog that doesn't carry the story, and self-indulgent authorial intrusion. You can never get rid of it completely, but over a number of drafts you can give your reader an idea of what distinct thing you are witnessing.
9. Read people whose ability to perceive hasn't been undermined by cultural Photoshop, who understand the violence of the mundane. Four books that help to perceive the violence of everyday life are:
  - R.D. Laing's *The Politics of Experience*
  - Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*
  - Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death*
  - Peter Hoeg's *Borderliners*

These books will help you with your Promethean Rebellion.

10. Remember that for 250,000 years of human history, unruly children were tossed out of the cave to play with the bears and wolves and lions. Writing will run into taboos that are deep in your genes. When two of your characters are about to say things to each other that will destroy their friendships and marriages and lives, you'll feel like you're about to be tossed out of the cave. But your readers will be just as scared. They'll be paying serious attention to the story you're telling. That's a good thing. That's the best part of telling a story.



# 4

## Writing Family

*What do we love so much we want to protect it from strangers?*

—Robert Bly

EACH OF US bears a family on our shoulders whether we want to or not. So there are brothers or sisters, mothers or fathers, grandparents or great grandparents reading this chapter along with you. When you sit down to write, they'll be right there too.

Your family has the ability to travel with you even when all you've bought is a ticket for one. When you look at other people, you don't see family faces right away. But as you begin to feel part of a group, and that group has an identity, the faces of strangers suddenly begin to seem familiar.

Familiar. Family-ar.

A STORY you've written comes before a writing workshop and one of the other workshop members—up to right now your newest best friend—speaks that deadly phrase, “I liked it, but...” and then they say something awful about your story, the story

you poured your heart and soul into, the story that you finally found the courage to tell.

Suddenly you can't hear anything at all. Your ears stop functioning. However, your vision gets better. You can see what you hadn't before: that's not your best friend, that's your *sibling* sitting here in the workshop with you.

You look to the workshop instructor, but she seems to be paying serious attention to what your sibling is saying, and there's a rule that you can't say anything about your story while it's being workshopped because your writing is supposed to speak for itself, and it *would*, except this—this *person*, this former newest best friend—hasn't even *read* your story.

Now he's saying the same thing about your story that the instructor said about a story last week, and the instructor is nodding and smiling like he's saying something smart. Can't she see what he's doing? No, she can't, obviously. How'd she get to be a workshop instructor anyway? Spilled her guts over a ream of paper and called it a memoir. Put a bunch of depressing midnight diary entries into a book and called it poetry. And even if she could write, she can't teach.

Two can play this game. Your ex-newest-best-friend's story is up tomorrow. He didn't read yours but you're going to read his. You're going to read it line by line, and write detailed notes in tiny handwriting in the margins, and when he gets it back he's going to know something about you that he didn't know before. That you value honesty, even if it hurts.

It's the only way to help him improve as a writer.

I CONDUCTED my first creative writing workshop in September of 1974. It was full of ninth and tenth graders in a small private school in Sun Valley, Idaho. The author of my first workshopped story left the room in tears. I felt terrible. Then the author of my second workshopped story left the room in tears. When the third story came up I asked the person in the workshop who had been doing most of the talking to shut up. I didn't realize it at the time, but she had brought her invisible but incisive and critical mother into my workshop. When I told her to shut up, the mother vanished completely and the daughter—suddenly alone and facing a bunch of angry people—left the room in tears.

In the thirty years since that time I've learned less about running a workshop than you might think, but I do intervene a little more quickly and gently when workshop dynamics seem to be leading to tears.

It's an inexact science. There's something about sitting around a table with stories in our hands that brings up our family dinners, dinners where the leftover pot roast isn't the only evidence of carnage when the table is ready for clearing.

James Hillman, in his essay, "Extending the Family" writes: "The sign 'Home Cooking' might still bring in some customers, but for many the family table [is] the place of trauma... Here, at the table, family fights over money, politics or morals are most likely to break out, and... [the very notion of what constitutes 'good' food takes on its definitive form.] Here anorexia and bulimia—[and obesity]—appear first. Whether the atmosphere at meals is boisterous and competitive, or chaotic, or gravely formalized, tension is always on the menu."

Without much effort, you can probably remember the worst

family dinner you ever attended, what made it so awful, and why you get angry every time you think about it. Sitting at a table with a story in your hands isn't so different from sitting at a table with bread in your hands, and a glass of wine in front of you, and a secret nobody wants to talk about on everybody's mind.

THERE'S A REASON that I'm addressing you in the Second Person Aggressive. When someone starts talking about family or stories, it's all too easy to imagine that it's not your family and not your story that's being talked about.

But, yes, I'm talking about *your* family, the one you grew up in, the people that you carry with you as you read this. And I'm talking about your story, which may be yours alone or—more likely—may be the one your family forced upon you.

I am also addressing you as a writer, and no family is indifferent to having a writer in its midst. They are with you to make sure that you get an education, but that you don't learn anything they don't want you to learn, or write anything they don't want you to write.

One way to define a family is that it's a secret-keeping machine, and writers are the finders and blabbers of secrets.

One of the things MFA stands for is Might Freely Admit. And what you might freely admit is that Uncle Ernie lives down in the crawl space and seems to be quite happy there, at least since the operation. Or that Cousin Elmer, the fire-and-brimstone preacher, is being hounded for money by that girl he got pregnant when he was in high school. Or little Johnny can't have a pet because the last three rabbits he got for his birthdays—well, we can't talk about them.